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Karides

Ponniah Thomas

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In Defense of World Social Forum VII

Marina Karides^a and Thomas Ponniah^b

^a*Florida Atlantic University, Boca Raton, Florida, USA;*

^b*Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts, USA*

Keywords

World Social Forum, activists

... globalization from below shall be about clarification of value from within the movement and connection of the grassroots resistance. Indeed, the poor and the marginalized people struggles must protect the egalitarian nature of the WSF and safeguard it.

Steve Ouma (2007) Programmes Coordinator and Deputy Executive Director of the Kenya Human Rights Commission

A radically democratic change in the perception of global justice and human rights has occurred in the last seven years. The World Social Forum (WSF), as a meeting space and a process, is an innovation that has shifted the way NGOs, grassroots activists, and national movements strategize to meet their goals. Engagement in the WSFs is growing – an increasing number of participants: activists, organizers, and academics are following the evolving process of the Forums. This essay contends that the overall WSF process embodies an uneven, often contradictory, but evolving democratization with WSF7 advancing this agenda via its presence in one of the most peripheralized countries that included a substantially improved gender discussion and representation in comparison to previous Forums.

In the weeks following a WSF event, the Forums are subject to evaluations that are found on blogs, at the websites of organizations that participated, and are spread through listserves¹ that we believe largely influence

¹ Interestingly, though not the focus of this article, the Forum process receives little mainstream media attention even though the events attract tens of thousands of participants from around the world.

persons' perception of what occurred on the ground at the WSF. While we actively engage in these post-Forum discussions we remain critical of them. The World Social Forum is a novel social phenomenon that is still conceptually undigested. In addition, because it is such a large event, many of us who study the Forum believe that it is difficult to present a full story of what occurred on the ground at a single event. The range of issues and organizations that attend, make most assessment of the World Social Forum partial. Yet we also recognize that the Forums can be characterized according to some general trends with the most important of these being greater internal democratization.

We focus on the most recent WSF, held in Nairobi, Kenya in January 2007 and attempt to balance our account with some comparative data on the three nations (Brazil, India, Kenya) in which WSFs have been held with an assessment of the critiques of the Nairobi WSF and the Kenyan Organizing Committee that planned the event. Participants criticized the Kenyan Organizing Committee for permitting corporate involvement, the limited access to the forum by Kenya's poor, and over-representation of NGOs and religious organizations. Both of us participated in WSF7 as organizers and participants. Our analysis benefits from having attended the previous forums.

We begin by presenting the roots of the World Social Forum and eventually conclude with the achievements of the most recent edition of the WSF held in Nairobi, Kenya in January 2007.

The Roots of the WSF Process

Since 2001 the World Social Forum (WSF) has attempted to provide an open space for the global justice movements to develop alternatives to the current world order. The official origin of the Forum can be traced back to January 2000. One month after huge protests in Seattle against the World Trade Organization (WTO), three long time activists sat down in Paris to discuss alternatives to contemporary globalization. The first was Oded Grajew, the founder of the Brazilian Business Association for Citizenship (CIVES) that pulls together progressive businesses aligned with the Brazilian Workers' Party. The second was Francisco Whitaker, of the Brazilian Justice and Peace Commission (CBJP). The third was Bernard Cassen, chair of ATTAC-France (Association for the Taxation of Financial Transactions for the Aid of Citizens) and director general of the journal *Le Monde*

Diplomatique. Grajew proposed the idea of a Forum that would be an alternative to the World Economic Forum annually held in Davos, Switzerland. Since 1971 the Davos Forum has focused on bringing together world leaders, corporate executive officers (CEOs), and some non-governmental organizations (NGOs), to discuss the global economy. In the popular activist imagination the Davos Forum is perceived as the primary institution that discusses, formulates and advances contemporary globalization. Grajew, proposed a counter-summit, to be held simultaneously, that would debate alternatives to the current world order. The others agreed. The burgeoning global mobilizations needed to become visionary movements, not simply mobilizations against neoliberalism, but for a new society. Together they decided on three key framing concepts: one, the event should be held in the Global South, preferably in the city of Porto Alegre, in Brazil – home of the famous participatory budget process; two, its name should be the World Social Forum in order to juxtapose it to the World Economic Forum; and three it should be held at the same time as the World Economic Forum.

A number of Brazilian civil society organizations formed the Organizing Committee for the Forum. They were the Brazilian Association of Non-Governmental Organizations (ABONG), Association for the Taxation of Financial Transactions for the Aid of Citizens (ATTAC), the Brazilian Justice and Peace Commission (CBJP), the Brazilian Business Association for Citizenship (CIVES), the Brazilian Institute for Social and Economic Studies (IBASE) and the Social Network for Justice and Human Rights. In March 2000 the city of Porto Alegre's assent was secured. The city and its state government of Rio Grande do Sul, were under the governance of the Brazilian Workers' Party. Thus the coordination of the first Forum was driven by a number of Brazilian organizations within the context of a progressive city and state.

Porto Alegre was seen as an appropriate initial site for the World Social Forum because the city had been governed by the Worker's Party since 1988 and was celebrated for its innovative participatory budgetary process grounded in radical reform of the relationship between the public, the government and business. The reform was and is radical because it inhibited corporate control over the democratic process by giving popular mobilizations leverage over the municipal government. The annual participatory budget process of Porto Alegre was designed according to the following distinct stages. The process begins in March with citizen forums across

sixteen geographic and sectoral areas of the city. Forums of five hundred to seven hundred people elected two representatives and two alternates to serve one year on the budget council. In April and May, the forum representatives organized smaller assemblies to propose the budget priorities of the public for the following year. Between May and mid-July, the proposed budget priorities were forwarded to the current Municipal Council (33 councilors elected by traditional democratic means). Simultaneously, the forum representatives attended training sessions on municipal finance. A draft budget was constructed by the budget council and municipal bureaucrats and sent to the mayor and the Municipal Council for consultation. Between October and December, the participatory budget council amended the budget for a final approval from the Municipal Council and for eventual implementation in January. Altogether the four phases aimed at maximizing public involvement in setting the city's social and economic development priorities.² The success of this innovative, engaged, financial planning process made Porto Alegre the ideal home for a movement searching for alternative social models.

Along with this “official origin” there are two unofficial sources of the World Social Forum. The first is oriented around an indigenous social movement. In 1994, the Zapatistas led an indigenous uprising in the state of Chiapas in Mexico. At the time the Zapatista rebellion was called the “world’s first postmodern revolution”³ because, the movement made extensive use of internet networks; as well, unlike previous revolutionary struggles, the Zapatistas did not want to take control of the national state, they simply wanted autonomy in certain indigenous territories. This stance towards government was different from past uprisings in the 20th century where the revolutionaries had sought state power. Linked to their emphasis on autonomous organizing, the Zapatistas identified with struggles all over the world: anarchism, feminism, queer politics, anti-racism, and every possible movement against oppression. In 1996, the Zapatista convened a world conference called “The International Gathering For Humanity and Against Neoliberalism”. This meeting pulled together 3000 activists from 43 countries to debate strategy against contemporary globalization.⁴ That encounter could be seen as the unofficial first WSF.

²) Rebeck 2000, pp. 26–29.

³) Golden 2001.

⁴) EZLN 1997.

The second unofficial source of the WSF also emerged in 1996. The suggestion for a counter-summit to Davos was, in fact, formulated during the twentieth anniversary of the Tricontinental Center in Leuven, Belgium.⁵ The Center had been founded in 1976 as a research institute specifically focused on national liberation processes in Africa, Asia and Latin America. The Center is the focal point of network research institutes located throughout Global South. The groups associated with the Center organized the first anti-Davos event in Switzerland in 1999, thereby highlighting the importance of an alternative to the World Economic Forum. Thus, along with the Zapatistas' "Global Encounter For Humanity Against Neoliberalism", the Tricontinental Center also contributed a crucial element that would lead to the formulation of the World Social Forum.

The Open Space

The Zapatista encounter and the Tricontinental counter-summit were steps towards creating the World Social Forum. The culminating step was the introduction by Grajew, Whitaker and Cassen of the "Open Space" concept of the Forum. Many have wondered whether the Forum is a new global political agent, replacing the past role of the Soviet Union, or the Working Men's Internationals. The Forum organizers, as outlined in the WSF's Charter of Principles, defined the Forum not as an agent, but as an open pedagogical space that enables mutual education, networking and the production of diverse alternatives.⁶ The Charter explicitly prohibits the Forum from becoming a deliberative body. The Forum's Charter is upheld by its International Council that brings together over a hundred of the most prominent social movements in the world. As a whole, though with many disagreements, they have ensured that the Forum acts as an arena, not an agent, through which social projects can be formulated. For example the global protests of February 15, 2003, that coordinated ten million activists around the world to mobilize against the war in Iraq, was organized by activists at the 2003 World Social Forum. The Forum organizers themselves did not call on activists to unite against the war, nor did they write a collective manifesto denouncing the war.⁷ The Forum was the space within which anti-war move-

⁵ Houtart and Polet 2001.

⁶ World Social Forum 2001, Fisher and Ponniah 2003.

⁷ Ponniah was the official note-taker at the 2003 International Council Meetings one day before the start of the 2003 World Social Forum. Some members of the International

ments coordinated the global protests. The essence of the Forum then is to be an arena for the articulation of multiple alternatives.

The search for new social visions has been a popular one. The first Forum in 2001 had over ten thousand activists from around the world gather in Porto Alegre, Brazil. The second Forum had over 50,000 participants. The numbers at the third swelled to over 100,000. The fourth, held in Mumbai, India, totaled over 120,000. The fifth returned to Porto Alegre, increasing to over 150 000 people. The sixth was held in three different sites: Venezuela, Mali and Pakistan. And its the most recent, in January 2007, to which we now turn our attention. It was held in Nairobi, Kenya. Along with the seven World Social Forums held since 2001 there have also been over a hundred and fifty regional and thematic forums held around the world.

Criticizing WSF7

All of the World Social Forums, along with being lauded individually for providing a new direction for which to build a wide, rich, global scope for social justice and human rights initiatives also have been subject to a range of criticism from WSF participants. The criticisms, tensions, and questions directed at the WSF from within the WSF reflect its participatory democratic principles, that is, its commitment to an open space. The critiques reflect an organic movement within the WSF to continually self-metamorphose in order to better meets the principles of egalitarian justice that it espouses. Far from dissipating the successful, persistent efforts of the Forum, the challenges to the WSF sustain a foundational operating goal – to renegotiate conditions so that the event may pre-figure the new societies participants are intent on creating across the globe.

There is an established range of criticisms that are perpetually presented at most Forums. These include basic organizational difficulties, the lack of transparent accountability of the leading bodies of the WSF, the huge resources utilized for organizing a single world conference, and the limited presence of women and feminism. Each new Forum brings forth a new set of critiques that are particular to it and the context within which it takes place. Yet we argue that the criticisms of the most recent forum in Nairobi were less reflexive than usual, in that they did not take account of the more

Council argued that the Forum should take a unified statement against the war. The International Council as a whole disagreed.

challenging socio-economic condition of Kenya, particularly in comparison to the other nations, where the Forum has been previously held. Below we review some of the key concerns that surrounded the WSF Forum in Nairobi and then offer an analysis.

Funding the Forums

It is particularly challenging to coordinate an event that is not just representative of the poor, marginalized, and disenfranchised but also a place where these groups participate, mobilize and network. This hurdle was significantly highlighted in the Kenyan context in which resources are substantially limited. Unlike other locations where WSFs have been held, the Kenyan Organizing Committee did not have the same access to public and non-profit financial resources.

As noted earlier the Forums are rooted in Porto Alegre, Brazil where the state, governed by the Workers Party for almost two decades till 2004, could facilitate the logistics and provide financial assistance for the establishment of the World Social Forum. Similarly, in Caracas, Venezuela where one of the 2006 Polycentric Forums was held, the national government of Hugo Chavez offered full financial support providing venues for events and free public transportation to WSF participants. Even in these two contexts, where the state actively supported the WSF, there were logistical difficulties, organizational challenges, and the marginalization of groups within the Forums. For example in Porto Alegre for WSF V, the organizers were faulted for the marginal location of the indigenous tent. The tent was at such a distance from other meeting spaces that most of the WSF participants did not attend events held at the indigenous rights space so that eventually activists working in this space abandoned their tent in order to participate in the wider Forum. In Caracas criticism was waged against the secondary status of the Youth Camp, which has generally been a free location for young activists, to reside and self-organize. The youth camp was too far a field from other events, offered limited safety, and was generally uninhabitable due to flooding.

While the Forums held in Latin America had government funding, the first WSF held outside of Porto Alegre in Mumbai, India relied on no public or private funding but on the financial support of national and international NGOS. The lack of government support in India provoked the Indian Organization Committee to mobilize resources from various movements and through volunteerism rather than buying services or rely-

ing on provisions from the state. The organizing committee in India was also able to refuse funding from the Ford foundation, symbolizing the complete rejection of sponsorship by transnational corporate entities.

Capitalists in, the Poor out?

The relocation of the WSF to Kenya was the first time the main event was located in the peripheral rather than semi-peripheral nations (although one of the three components of the 2006 polycentric Forum was held in Bamako, Mali in 2006). Highlighted among the criticisms of WSF7 was the participation of corporate entities, the cost of food and drink, and the limited opportunity for entry by very poor Kenyans. We sum up below the discussions of the various challenges that were identified at the WSF 2007.⁸ We conclude by offering some thoughts why corporate capital involvement and social exclusion occurred at the Nairobi WSF and suggest that this reflects political economic conditions of Kenya rather than Kenya's organizing committee willingness to sacrifice the principles of the WSF.

Telephones, Water, and Food

Widely condemned on progressive websites was the presence of Celtel, a formerly African and now Kuwait transnational telecommunications company that had exclusive rights at the WSF. In exchange Celtel provided all communication equipment for the event and WSF publicity banners, which also prominently featured the company's logo. The Kenyan Organizing committee was criticized for using Celtel, for permitting its conspicuous presence on the stadium grounds where the forum was held, and for facilitating an increase in Celtel's customer base. A secondary criticism raised was that the Forum utilized Celtel rather than Safaricom, an African telecommunication company. However, Professor Onyango Oloo, national coordinator of Kenya's organizing committee, stated that Safaricom had been approached by the WSF to partner with the conference but turned down the offer because they identified it as too politically partisan.

⁸⁾ These criticisms appeared on the various list-serves associated with WSF commentary, such as WorldSocialForum-Discuss Archives (http://mail.openspaceforum.net/pipermail/worldsocialforum-discuss_openspaceforum.net/).

Another private contract the WSF entered into was with Kenyan Airways that became the official airlines of the WSF offering discounted airfare to participants of the Forum. Engagement with large corporations compromises the principles of the WSF. The corporate presence was also felt through the water suppliers, Grange Park, another contract agreed upon by the Organizing Committee. Water was sold at three times the usual cost in Kenya.

The cost of water was one aspect of the general problem of the availability of food and drink at the WSF site. First, food stalls by small or individual vendors, were not apparent in the central areas around the stadium where many of the Forum events were being held. Instead these vendors were located somewhat to the side and were sparsely visited. The venues that were centrally located were strikingly upscale in terms of the cost per meal and the formal attire of food servers and cooks. Unfortunately participants, along with not knowing that there were numerous food venues just outside the main area of the Forum, were also unaware that the centrally located venue, the Windsor Café, was an extension of a golf resort owned by John Mikuchi, Kenya's Internal Security Minister also known as the "Crusher" for both his work under British colonialism and in inhibiting free media. The knowledge of the ownership of the prominent food stand came late but not too late for protests to occur within the Forum venue by younger Kenyan slum residents who took direct action, surrounded the Windsor café and fed themselves from the overpriced food stall.

Indeed the very poor and disenfranchised slum dwellers drew attention to what was considered one of the most insidious faults of the Nairobi Forum; poor and low income Kenyans were financially constrained from attending the forum. From the first day of the event, the slum residents, many from the nearby Korogochu settlement (one of the larger slums in Nairobi), held protests at the entrance gate of the WSF that was held at Nairobi's major sports stadium. Many Nairobians considered the admittance fee, Ksh 500 (about \$7.50) very high especially in light of the fact that many earn little more than that per week.

By the evening of the 3rd day of the Forum, WSF organizers, who had earlier diverted participants towards gates where protests were not being held, agreed to permit free entry to the slum dwellers assuaging the tensions building among activists. Protest on entry fees for Kenyans were also conducted within the Forum in which slum residents and WSF participants headed for the administrative offices and serendipitously found the

organizers at a press conference. Coverage of the confrontation claimed that protesters were able to use the media forcing organizers to publicly commit to rectify the situation. Finally, the venue, Kasarani stadium, was also criticized, because it is an exclusive venue where most Kenyans or even inhabitants of Nairobi have never visited.

A Political Economic Analysis

Commenting on the shortcomings of the social forums is a perpetual activity of participants, progressive websites, and those who stand outside the WSF though participate in the global justice movement. It is worth considering why there is limited analysis of why such shortcomings occur. While the criticisms noted above are accurate and need to be reviewed, most do not offer a diagnosis of the challenges faced by the Kenyan Organizing Committee.

Table 1 Social and economic indicators of nations that hosted the WSF

	Brazil	India	Kenya
Population	188, 078, 227	1, 095, 351, 995	34,707,817
GDP per capita	8600	3700	1200
Percent of population below poverty line	31	25	50
Number of NGOs	276,000	1.5 million, est.	1000, est.

CIA *World Fact Book* 2007.

Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística 2004.

Indianngos.com.

Nomadnet.com.

Kenya is the poorest and smallest nation that has held the WSF. Table 1 shows that Kenya's GDP per capita is less than half of India's and a little more than a fourth of Brazil's. More striking is the poverty rate in Kenya that includes half of the population, double that of India's and approximately 40 percent higher than that of Brazil's. While the Brazilian and India poverty are high, Kenya's extensive poverty is one demonstration of its peripheral position in the world economy.

Table 1 also includes estimates on the number of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) operating in each of these nations. While India's

population size helps to explain why there are more than a million NGOs, the sheer number of organizations provides an understanding of the resources that the local organizers of WSF in India could mobilize. This may have given them increased access to International Non-governmental Organizations (INGOs) with greater resources. Kenya by comparison has a much smaller NGO community, one that may be more burdened given the poverty levels of the nation. Brazil although having a relatively low rate of NGOs, was assisted in the organization of the WSF by government funds and infrastructure.

The Kenyan Organizing committee is made up of about 8 sub-committees with 10 members each. When the youth protested the overpriced food venues, Professor Oyungi, came out to address the group, clarified some false accusations – such as the WSF Nairobi logo being stolen from youth creators – and agreed to address the issues that included the prohibitive cost of entry to the Forum for at least half of all Kenyans. In appreciating the radical democratic roots of the WSF, it is worthwhile noting that the adjustments made during the WSF event in Nairobi was brought forth not by the international participants per se, although many participated in protests, but from the subaltern groups of Nairobi, specifically the residents of the poorest slums that face daily and deeply the worst of neoliberal globalization.

The social and economic indicators, presence of NGOs, and short time for preparations, does not explain all the reasons that the WSF committees relied on contracts with corporations but we think it offers some important background. While the criticisms of the WSF in general and in Kenya, are necessary for ensuring continuous democratization there appears to be a systematic lack of analysis as to why anti-democratic transgressions occur at WSF VII. Granted, some commentary does recognize that attempts at prefigurative politics takes place in a large context of corporate domination and its consequent social inequality. However, interrogating the contexts where WSF has been held may deepen our understanding of how to deter future infringement and further the goal of making other worlds possible.

Feminist Fusion in the Seventh Round

The success of the World Social Forum lies in its ability to reinvent itself. The 7th edition of the Forum demonstrated this in various fields but most notably in terms of gender and feminism. Although women were still not equally represented as panelists, there was a greater consciousness that they

should be and thus the beginning of an understanding of the fundamental role gender inequality plays in fueling the neo-liberalism. This advance can be largely attributed to the efforts of various feminist and women organizations such as the Feminist Dialogues.

Feminist Dialogues

In 2003 the first Feminist Dialogues were held in Porto Alegre, Brazil, meeting a few days prior to the World Social Forum. The Feminist Dialogues created a space to share concerns globally, and provides one of the first locations outside of the United Nations, for women from a wide range of nations and organizations representing the Global South and Global North to converge and identify collective interests and discuss strategies to challenge neo-liberal globalization and how to participate as feminists in the larger global justice movement. Although they have developed into an on going exchange between progressive, action oriented feminist groups, the Feminist Dialogues were created due to the neglect of women, feminism, and gender at the World Social Forum. The Feminist Dialogues frame their discussions in terms of fundamentalisms: older, religious-based fundamentalisms and newer, economic ones to conceptualize the injustices women experience globally.

Women have been absent from important decision-making sites of the WSF. For instance, the Charter of Principles, while an effective document, was developed by 13 men.⁹ In addition, women have been in short representation as panelists particularly in the larger, WSF-sponsored events that men tended to dominate in early Forums. The other prominent criticism waged by feminist organizations is that neo-liberalism rides on gender inequities is often absent from events. The WSF events and thematic programming have not integrated feminist political economy in their critique of globalization but in many ways have ghettoized it.

Thematic Integration

We suggest that that in the 7th Edition of the World Social Forum there was a larger representation of women on panels and that there was a thematic integration of feminist perspectives on globalization and neo-liberalism

⁹ These criticisms appeared on the various list-serves associated with WSF commentary, such as WorldSocialForum-Discuss Archives (http://mail.openspaceforum.net/pipermail/worldsocialforum-discuss_openspaceforum.net/).

throughout the program. Consistent with the overarching theme of the WSF VII, “People’s Choices, People’s Alternatives,” women and gender were for the first time a distinct thematic axe that organized the programming of the WSF. The number of axes and topics vary from year to year and are primarily decided upon by the local organizing committee. The definition of the theme in the program was as follows:

The objective of this activity is to demonstrate how neo-liberalism strengthens the patriarchal nature of society and the inequalities between sexes. How the neo-liberal policies produce the depauperation of women, and the oppression. The alliance between conservative categories and the owners of all markets produces cultural schemes and women-man relationship that are produces cultural schemes and women-man relationship that are systematically oppressive and limitative of the political freedom and the freedom of the body.

We suggest that the increased representation of women and integration of feminism in the program of the WSF VII reflects the commitment to participatory democracy and a broadening appreciation of the intersections of gender inequality and neoliberal globalization. Yet we also suggest that the Kenyan context and the continental context contributed to highlighting gender inequality in WSF VI, the first WSF held in Africa. In many African nations and tribes the contributions of women’s economic and social roles are widely recognized and many women participate in government.

Conclusion

Although we believe that a distinct “essence” runs through the WSFs that is rooted in the foundation of its development, our comparison of nations that have held WSFs suggest that political, economic, and social conditions of these nations shape the WSF both in its content and structure. There were numerous criticisms hurled at the World Social Forum held in January 2007 in Kenya – most focused on economic issues such as the presence of corporations on the site and the prohibitive cost of entry for the average Kenyan. These criticisms were only partially correct because they lacked an awareness of the Kenyan political economy and a recognition of WSF7’s achievements.

Kenya is poorer than the previous sites in which the Forum was held. It was inevitable that it would face challenges in terms of raising adequate

funding for the Forum and thus understandable that there would be some corporate presence – though not necessarily as much as there was. Interestingly what few of the critics noted were the achievements of this Forum, with the most significant being the emergent presence of women and gender-related discussions in many of the workshops. The inclusion of Kenya and the evolution of a prominent feminist discourse within the Forum are significant steps forward. The Forum has consistently demonstrated a commitment to greater democratization, not only in its embrace of diverse voices, but also in its willingness to relocate from its original Brazilian location with the intention of expanding participation from other regions. The decentralization of the WSF is helping to facilitate a world-wide mobilization around human rights and social justice. The emergence of gender will intensify the Social Forum's expanding, radically democratic challenge to the current form of globalization, while establishing a precedent for WSF 2009 in Brazil.

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